

THE BATTLE OF BEERSHEBA

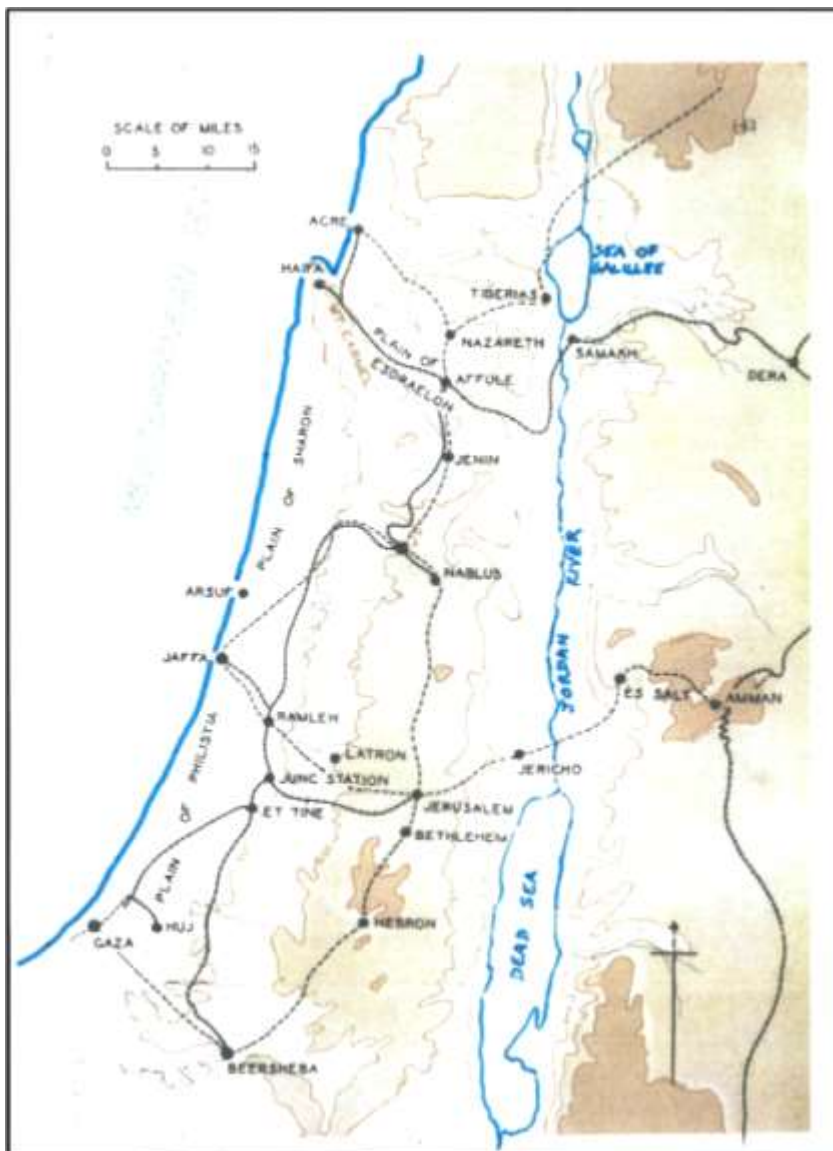
31 OCTOBER 1917

[This description of the battle of Beersheba on 31 October 1917 was written by Kris Schlyder and was accurately drawn from the Australian Army military history textbook "Suez to Aleppo" published by the Directorate of Military Training in 1955. Textbook used with official permission.]

INTRODUCTION

In March and April 1917 the British forces between the Suez Canal and Gaza, under British General Murray, launched two unsuccessful and very costly attacks against the Turkish and German forces entrenched around Gaza. In June 1917 General Murray was relieved of his command and was replaced by British General Sir Edmund Allenby. At this time Britain was suffering defeats on all fronts of the war against Germany. When General Allenby was appointed to replace General Murray the Prime Minister of Britain called on him to capture and liberate Jerusalem before Christmas in order to give the people of Britain a morale boost.

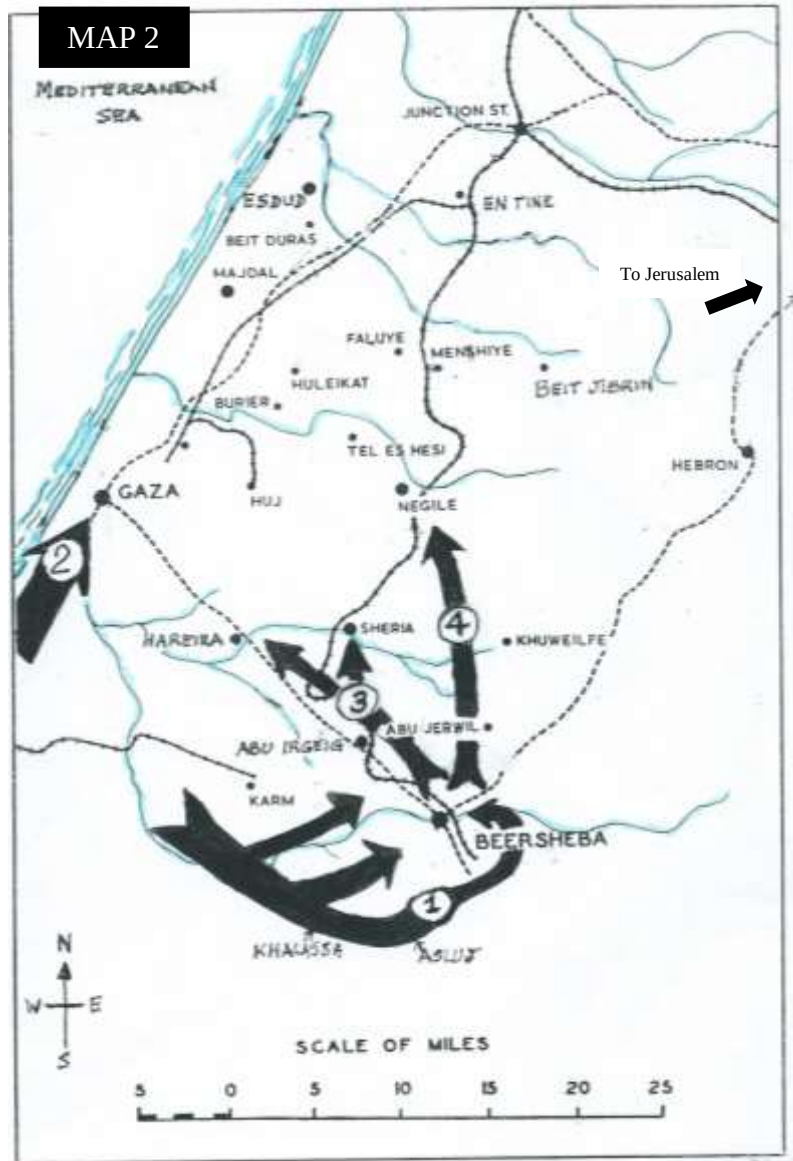
MAP 1 - TOWNS, ROADS, RAILWAYS



The Turkish and German defence line stretched from Gaza to Beersheba. **See Map 1.** Their defences were strong in the area of Gaza and the centre of the line, but much weaker out in the desert around Beersheba, where there was little water and the Turks and German commanders did not expect a major attack. General Allenby instituted elaborate measures to deceive the Turkish and German commanders into believing the next major British attack would be directed against the main defences at Gaza near the Mediterranean coast, just like the two previous unsuccessful attacks against Gaza were.

ALLENBY'S OVERALL PLAN

However, Allenby's final plan aimed at the destruction of the Turkish army in successive phases. In the first phase (see circled 1 on **Map 2**) 20 Corps and the Desert Mounted Corps would capture Beersheba and the defensive works immediately west and south west of the town. 20 Corps would then be generally facing north-east, while Desert Mounted Corps would be watering their horses at the captured wells, holding off any possible counter-attack from the north and north-east, and preparing for exploitation aimed at cutting off the retreat of the enemy on the centre and Gaza sectors.



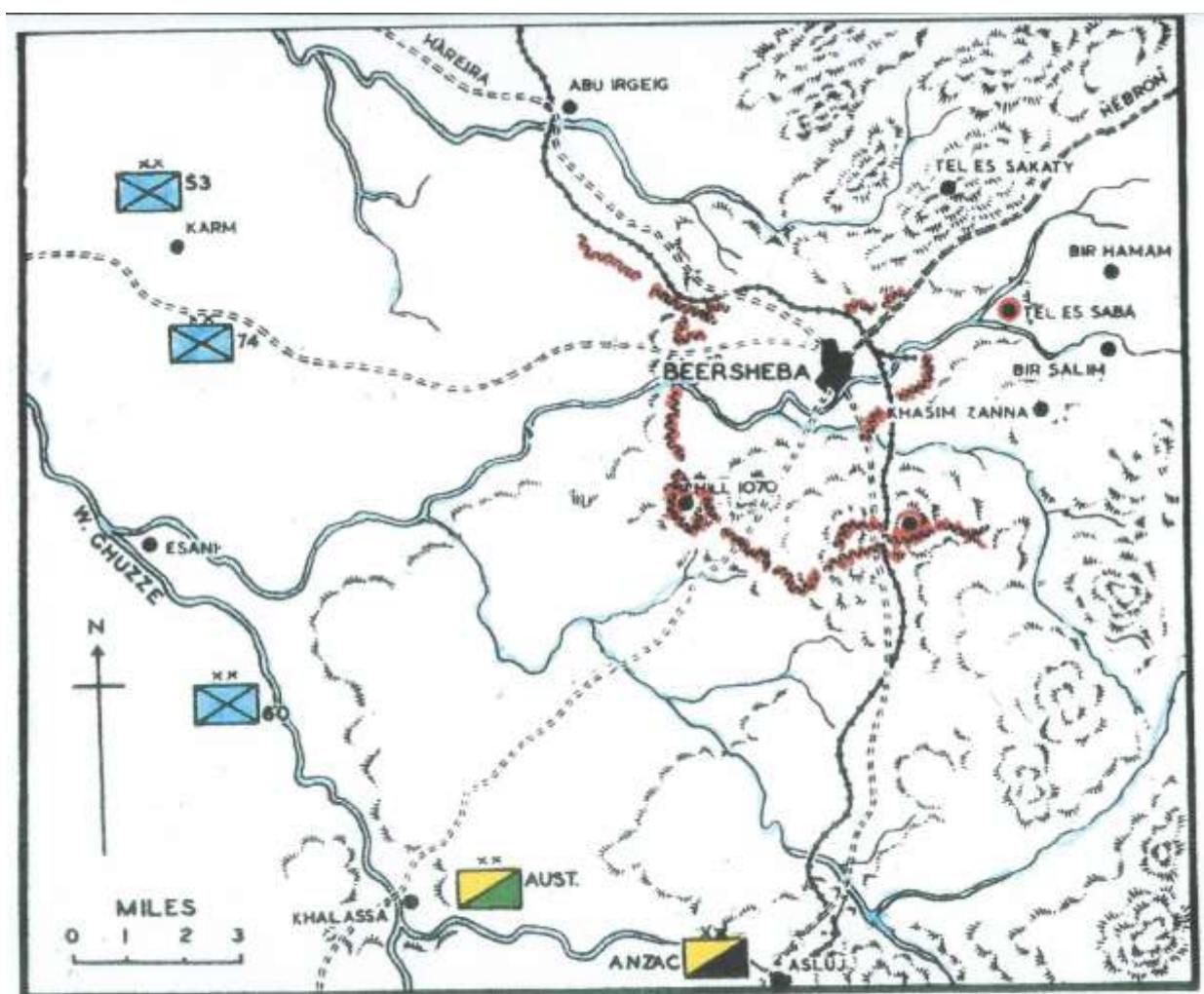
Immediately on completion of the first phase, 21 Corps, assisted by heavy bombardment from the sea, would launch a powerful attack on Gaza with the object of capturing important localities, pinning down the enemy, and distracting his attention from the other flank (see circled 2 on **Map 2**). While this action was taking place 20 Corps would drive the enemy from his Sheria and Hareira positions (see circled 3 on **Map 2**). With these positions in its possession the Corps would operate against the enemy's left flank, which would then be open.

Desert Mounted Corps would sweep north-westward on the right of 20 Corps with the immediate object of capturing the wells at Tel el Negile (see circled 4 on **Map 2**). With its horses once again watered it would then be in a position to operate against the rear of the enemy troops defending the Gaza sector. If all went well the Turkish army would be "in the bag."

The date General Allenby chose to attack Beersheba was 31 October 1917, which coincided with a full moon, and which would facilitate the movement of thousands of men by night into the areas from which they would attack Beersheba. Beersheba, and its 19 wells including those of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, had to be captured in one day, by the night of 31 October, because 11,000 Australian, New Zealand and British horsemen and their horses would need water immediately after the battle, in order to be ready for the next phase of the bigger battle.

PREPARATIONS FOR ATTACK ON BEERSHEBA

In the days and nights before the night of 30 October all the Allied troops committed to the battle for Beersheba moved east through the desert by night, and hid as best they could during the days in gullies, wadis etc. By dark on the 30th October the British 53rd, 60th, and 74th Divisions (each of about 12-15,000 men) under British Lieutenant General Chetwode, and the 11,000 horsemen of the Desert Mounted Corps under Australian Lieutenant General Harry Chauvel, were in the positions shown on **MAP 3**.



MAP 3 Situation around Beersheba

30 October 1917

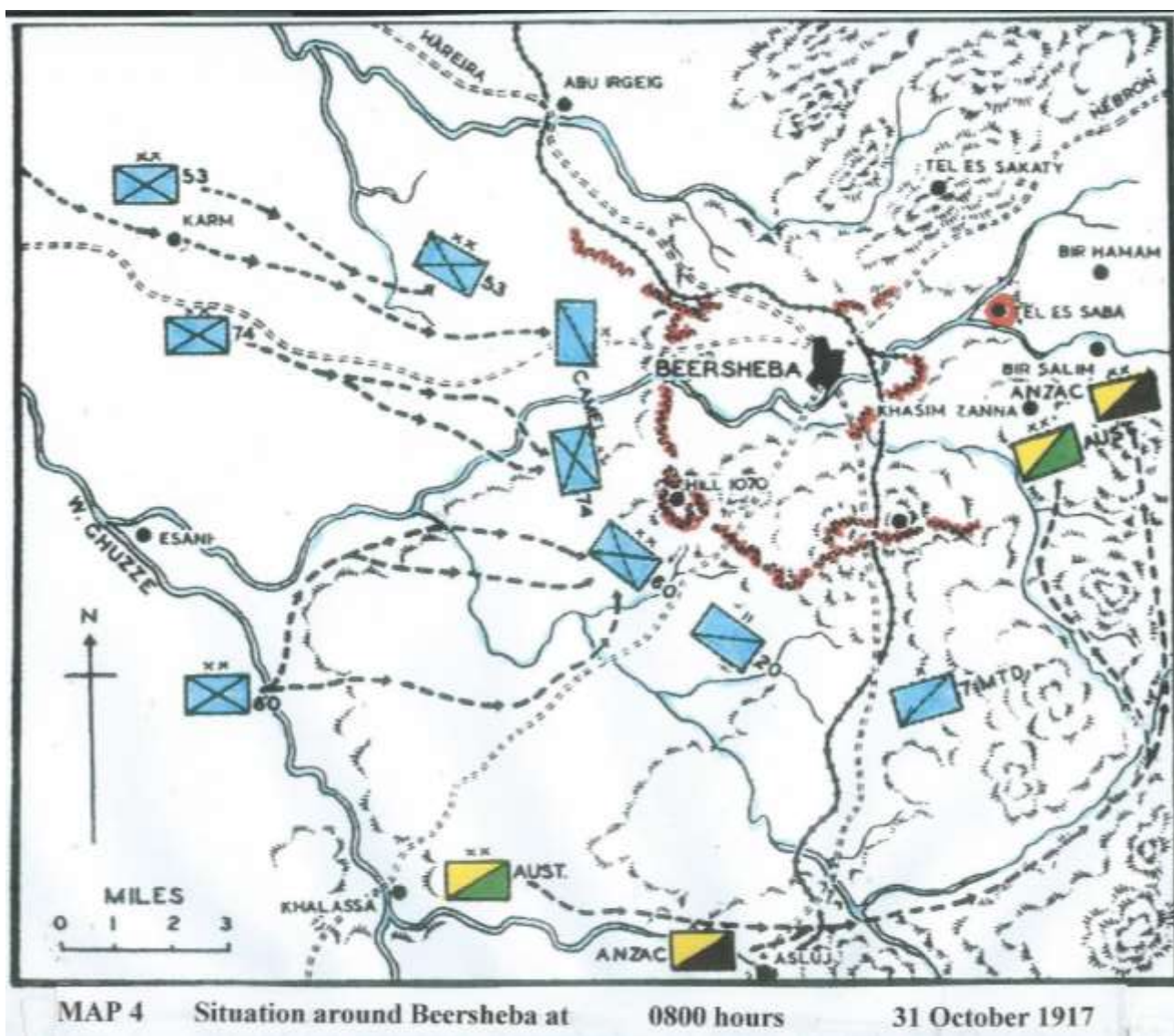
The Turkish/German defences are marked in red. The British divisions and units are marked in blue. The Desert Mounted Corps consisted of two mounted divisions..... The **Australian Mounted Division** (colours are shown as green and gold), which consisted of the 3rd and 4th Australian Light Horse brigades, and the British 5th Yeomanry Cavalry Brigade.....and the **Anzac Mounted Division** (colours are shown as black and gold), which was commanded by New Zealander Major General Chaytor, and consisted of the 1st and 2nd Australian Light Horse brigades, and the New Zealand Mounted Rifles Brigade.

During the night of 30 October all those troops had to move into their positions to start the battle early next morning on 31 October. The British divisions and some associated units had to march at least 8 miles or 13 kilometres over difficult terrain by night to reach their attack positions by 0400 hours. They were all in position on time! Their task was NOT to capture Beersheba. 53 Division was to block Turkish reinforcements coming from the west. 60 Division and 74 Division were to attack and capture the major enemy defences in the area of Hill 1070 and pin down other Turkish defences, so that the Desert Mounted Corps could attack and capture the town of Beersheba and its wells from the east where the Turkish defence were much lighter.

THE BATTLE FOR BEERSHEBA BEGINS

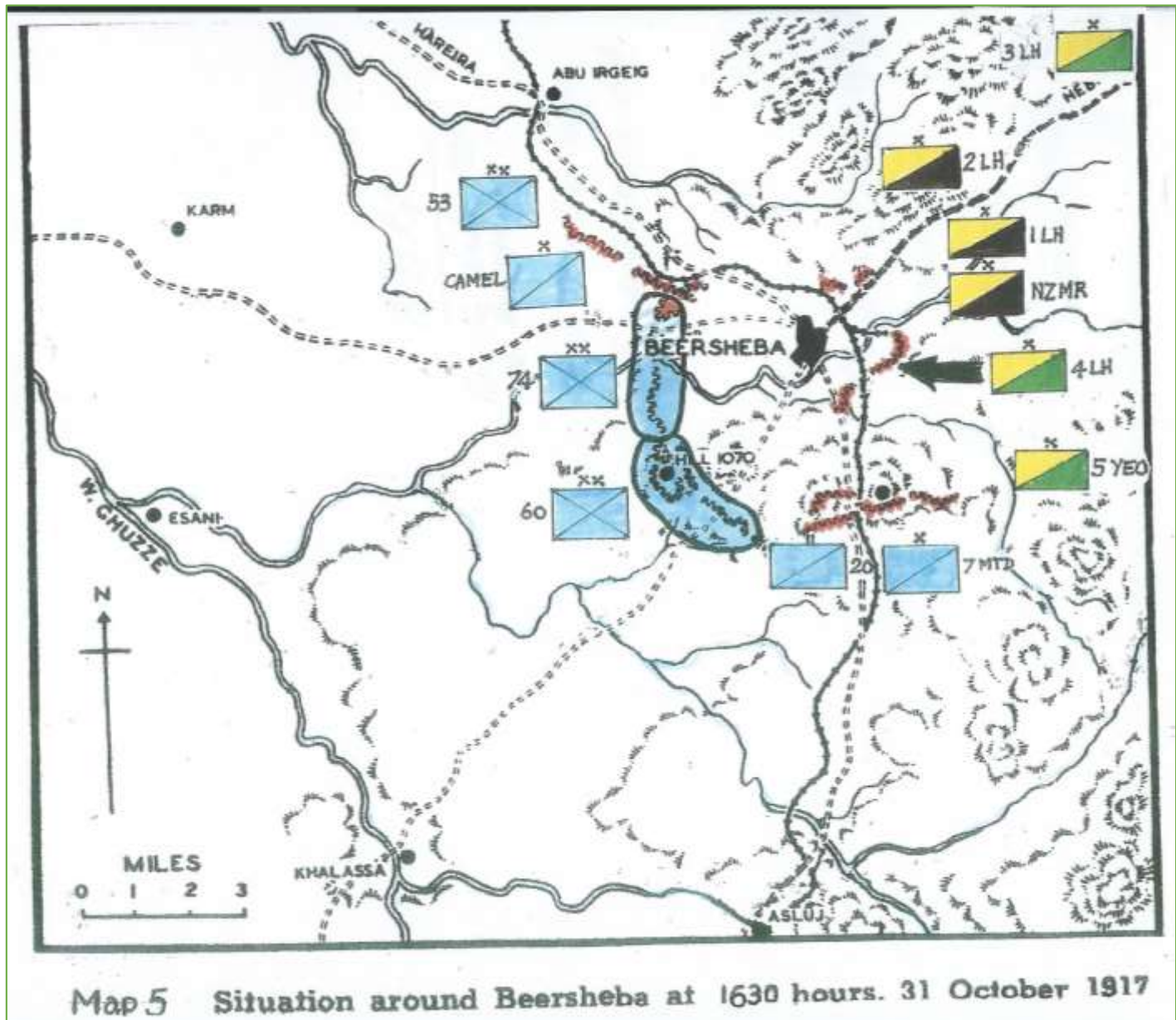
During the night of 30 October the Desert Mounted Corps, with the Anzac Mounted Division leading, had to ride 30 miles or 50 kilometres over unreconnoitred and very poorly mapped country to emerge to the east of Beersheba in the area of Bir Salem and Khasim Zanna.

What was remarkable - even miraculous - was the fact that every unit involved in the attack on Beersheba reached its allotted station at the specified time. And that was no mean feat, even for experienced troops. **MAP 4** shows where all the troops were at 0800 hours on 31 October.



British artillery started shelling the Turkish defences at 0555 hours and the infantry of 60 Division and 74 Division commenced their attack at 0830 hours. 53 Division moved to its blocking position to prevent Turkish forces from entering the battle area from the west.

The British 60th and 74th Divisions continued to press home their attack around Hill 1070, and by 1330 hours the area enclosed within the two sausage-shaped blue areas marked on **MAP 5** had been captured. By the time night fell on 31 October, and despite suffering considerable casualties, the British forces captured all of the areas they had been assigned.



Earlier that day, at 0900 hours 31 October, as the British infantry were attacking the Turkish positions near Hill 1070, Anzac Mounted Division commenced carrying out the tasks it had been given. Its commander, Major-General Chaytor, sent 2nd Australian Light Horse Brigade to capture the enemy position on Tel Es Sakaty, and hold it to prevent Turkish reinforcements coming from Hebron.

At 0900 hours he also sent the New Zealand Mounted Rifles Brigade to capture and hold Tel Es Saba.

By 1300 hours 2nd Australian Light Horse Brigade had captured Tel Es Sakaty, some wells nearby, and the line of the road. But Tel Es Saba was a more formidable obstacle. The mound is on the northern bank of

Wadi Saba, is 400 metres long and 200 metres wide, with a flat rocky top. All sides are steep, but the wadi side is a cliff. It was full of trenches, infantry soldiers, and machine guns. Progress was slow and costly in casualties to the New Zealanders.

At 1100 hours General Chaytor reinforced the New Zealanders with most of 1st Australian Light Horse Brigade. With help from British artillery, and after intense fighting, the two brigades captured Tel Es Saba at 1500 hours, and were still there when the charge by 4th Australian Light Horse Brigade swept by them on their way into Beersheba later that afternoon. It is worth noting that if Tel Es Saba had not been captured and held, the charge of 4ALH Brigade may have had a different or disastrous result.

Lieutenant-General Chauvel now sent 3rd Australian Light Horse Brigade to block the road further north towards Hebron, and then addressed the problem he had.....he was running out of daylight, and the order he had been given by General Allenby was to capture Beersheba and its wells before nightfall. Sunset was at 1650 hours. He only had two uncommitted brigades available and they were somewhat dispersed because of attacks by German aircraft during the day.

THE CHARGE BY 4TH AUSTRALIAN LIGHT HORSE BRIGADE

Brigadier-General Grant, commander of 4th Australian Light Horse Brigade, then volunteered his brigade to take Beersheba and its wells by a direct cavalry-style charge. His men had no cavalry swords only 45 cm bayonets, and their normal tactic would have been to ride to a point in front of the Turkish trenches, dismount, and go forward with rifle and bayonet.

General Grant was talking about his entire brigade charging on horseback over about 6 kilometres of open, bare ground, then at and over the Turkish manned trenches, and on into Beersheba to take it and prevent German engineers blowing up the precious water wells. General Chauvel agreed to his plan. See troop dispositions on **MAP 5**.

It was 1630 hours before General Grant was able to gather his brigade from dispersed locations, form up with 4 ALH Regiment on the right, 12 ALH Regiment on the left, and 11 ALH Regiment bringing up the rear in reserve.....and commence the charge. The leading regiments rode in three successive lines each of a squadron extended at four or five paces interval between riders. As soon as they appeared on the plain they were engaged by Turkish artillery. But soon they were travelling faster than the Turkish gunners could lower their sights, and many of the shells went over their heads. Turkish machine guns and riflemen in the trenches opened furious fire on them, but they kept on.

At the Turkish trenches some squadrons went straight over the top, and on into Beersheba, seizing it, taking many prisoners, and preventing 17 of the 19 wells from being blown up. Others dismounted into the trenches and took on the Turks in hand-to-hand fighting. 4 ALH Brigade suffered 64 casualties, including 32 killed or died of wounds, in the charge. In retrospect their losses were much lower than they would have expected from such a bold charge.

Clearly God's hand was in that outcome. After the battle it was found that the Turkish infantrymen had not lowered the sights of their rifles below 800 metres. That means their bullets would have been passing over the heads of the horsemen, and that indicates a breakdown of the Turkish command structure. Praise God!

The day was won, but it was a near thing. Some Australians boast that the Light Horse did it all. But the truth is that if the British infantry and artillery, the New Zealand Mounted Rifles, and other Australian units, hadn't done, successfully, what they were tasked to do, at considerable loss of life, the now-famous charge by the 4th Australian Light Horse Brigade may have been a disaster, or it may have never happened.

However, the reality of it all was that the wells of Beersheba could not supply enough water for all the 11,000 horsemen and their horses that night, and they were unable to commence their planned movement north-west the following morning to cut off the Turkish withdrawal from Gaza.



The charge of the Australian Light Horse at Beersheba (1917), painted by George Lambert (1920), at the Palestine Gallery in the Australian War Memorial.

THE ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM

So, contrary to General Allenby's plan, the Turks and Germans escaped from his trap at Gaza, and it wasn't until 9 December 1917, after much heavy fighting along the way, that the British 60th Division entered Jerusalem.... unopposed. There had been some savage fighting on the outskirts of Jerusalem which was interrupted by absolutely torrential rain in freezing conditions. When the rain stopped and the British infantry went forward next morning on 9 December, they found the Turks had withdrawn out of Jerusalem toward the north.

The mayor of Jerusalem handed over the keys of the city to General Shea, Commander of the British 60th Division. The 10th Australian Light Horse Regiment from Western Australia, which had been acting as flank-guard for the 60th Division, entered into Jerusalem with that division.

The God of Israel has since blessed the then very young nations of Australia and New Zealand for our significant part in the liberation of Jerusalem and the Holy Land from 400 years of domination by the Turkish Ottoman Empire. That liberation commenced with the victory at Beersheba in 1917, and culminated in the creation of the modern state of Israel in 1948. All glory be to God Most High!